

George Shultz gets a chill in Peking

by Gregory F. Buhyoff

Secretary of State George Schultz was in Peking Feb. 2-5 on the second and most important leg of his recent three-nation Far East tour. Schultz's aim was to get U.S.-China relations "back on track," following an increase of tensions related to bilateral disputes and China's new "independent" foreign policy posture. Peking is now at loggerheads with U.S. policy in Africa, Central America, and the Middle East, compounding problems with continued U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and Washington's imposition of curbs on Chinese textile exports to the United States.

The mission hit rough waters even before the secretary's arrival. On Jan. 31, as Schultz was preparing to leave Tokyo for China, senior Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Hao Deqing lashed out at the United States in a way reminiscent of the coldest days of relations between the two countries. Hao declared, "Whatever its pretensions, the United States presence in the Asia-Pacific region is essentially, fundamentally hegemonistic. This is equally true of its bases in the Philippines, its troops in Southeast Asia, its defense treaties with Japan, and so on, as it is for its support of the Nationalist authorities on Taiwan. . . and it is time to end it all."

In public toasts and during press conferences after parleys with top Chinese officials, Shultz's hosts invariably pointed to the "dark clouds" over U.S.-China relations because of the Taiwan issue.

Schultz arrived to play the good listener to lectures from the Chinese on Taiwan. But he did not come to Peking to allow "neuralgic" bilateral disputes, as his friend Henry Kissinger referred to them, to interfere with his designs.

Shultz's objective was to skirt such differences and concentrate on returning to the Kissingerian concept of a strategic axis against the Soviet Union. The game is to "threaten" military ties with China but never go so far as to box the Soviets into a situation characterized by limited options. The United States should never throw all its chips on the table, rather it should be "unpredictable"—using the "threat" of a U.S.-China alliance as a pressure point to bring Moscow to the negotiating table.

This was the essence of Kissinger's criticism of the "crude" and "predictable" approach to the relationship taken by Zbigniew Brzezinski and Alexander Haig, both of whom were willing to do anything for a military relationship with China, shutting off Moscow entirely.

The return to the "classical" China Card, the approach

that had its heyday during the Nixon years, is now deemed especially important by the Kissinger types because of the critical juncture of the U.S. Soviet arms reduction talks. To this extent, the Shultz mission to China and the visit of Vice-President Bush to Europe were part of the same package, designed to lure Moscow into a Kissinger-style "arms control-détente" relationship. Therefore, while Bush was in Europe dropping hints that Washington might be willing to compromise short of the President's "zero option" proposal, Shultz was in Peking to restore the original character to the U.S.-China part of the triangle.

Kissinger aired these views at a special strategy session for Shultz and other officials prior to the trip, and in print in the *Washington Post*. According to a source close to the Jan. 7 session, Shultz was counselled not to do anything that might jeopardize the arms reduction talks with the Soviet Union. Shultz was advised to avoid bilateral disagreements and focus on "parallel strategic interests" in the process of determining the substance of China's "non-aligned" policy vis-à-vis the superpowers.

Shultz did not take with him any concessions on bilateral issues as had been case on almost every diplomatic visit to China during the Carter administration and under the Haig State Department. Nor did he flaunt the possibility of imminent U.S.-China military collaboration with a high-profile offering of U.S. arms to Peking. Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang also made it clear during the visit that no defense relationship exists between the China and the United States. However, Peking cooperated with Shultz by allowing for a "hastily arranged" meeting between Chinese Defense Minister Zhang Aiping, to keep the "threat" alive in the minds of the Soviet leadership.

Shultz reportedly took heart from the fact that hours after he left Peking, China's official Xinhua News Agency released an evaluative statement on the visit which said, amid critical rhetoric, that the U.S. and China hold "similar views" on the issues of Afghanistan, Kampuchea, and disarmament. But to interpret such a statement as a signal that China still holds to the idea of a U.S.-China strategic alliance against the Soviet Union could prove dangerous for Washington.

Kissinger tactics no longer correspond, if they ever did, to the perception of reality governing the minds of leaders in Peking. Though China strongly desires U.S. technology for its economic modernization program, for domestic political and strategic reasons it no longer considers it beneficial to line up with Washington against Moscow. China has no intention of being anybody's "card," especially at a time when it perceives the United States as declining economically and militarily. Peking is preoccupied, as it has always been, with its own self-interest, and now sees a "non-aligned" posture as most beneficial to its interests. Peking is damping its rhetoric toward both superpowers in order to keep both guessing. By threatening to lean in one direction or the other, Peking believes it can exact concessions from both.

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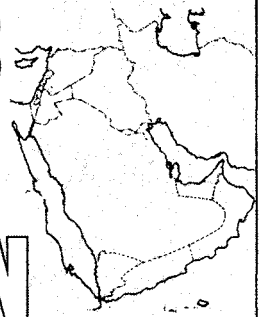
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